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ABSTRACT

A composition instructor inquired into the effect of computer conferencing in two composition courses taught entirely through computer-mediated instruction and infused with the pedagogy of feminist collaboration. The instructor encouraged the naming of self and the developing of relationship. The instructor prepared a composition curriculum, "Writing for the 21st Century," grounded on collaborative composition theory and reflecting the principles of a "woman-focused" classroom. The curriculum linked a critique of cultural institutions to personal experience. Early conversations reflected that even in asynchronous computer networking, personal connection was possible. Small groups offered the most opportunity for developing relationships. For the final project, students wrote to a group member to share their refections on that student's collaboration and, then, with insights from these views and from their own investigations, constructed a final paper to interpret their own collaboration. As students and the instructor reflected on the messages sent through the free space of computer conferencing, they were opening themselves to know more fully the authors of the messages. The environment in the computer culture went far beyond the instructor's expectations in establishing a community of trusting, diverse individuals--a community required both in the composition room and in the larger society. (Several examples of students' computer messages are included.) (RS)

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Building Community through Computer Conferencing and Feminist Collaboration:

A Presentation for the Computers and Writing Conference, Indianapolis, Indiana, May, 1992

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Building Community through Computer Conferencing and Feminist Collaboration: A Presentation for the Computers and Writing Conference, Indianapolis, Indiana, May, 1992

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> In a community, unlike a hierarchy, people get to know each other. They do not act as representatives of positions or as occupants of roles but as individuals with particular styles of thinking.
>
> --Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule[2]

The theme of the Computers and Writing Conference--Building Community--relates directly to my own inquiry into the effect of computer conferencing in two composition courses taught entirely through computer-mediated instruction and infused with the pedagogy of feminist collaboration. As a teacher-researcher at SUNY Empire State College, a non-traditional college for adult students, I immersed myself in the culture of asynchronous computer conferencing in order to interpret the significance of that culture for students and teacher. One interest, in particular, was the possibility of building community, important to the model of feminist collaboration that I wanted for my classroom. The theoretical foundation of the course rested, in part, on Gilligan's theory of women's aptitude for relationship.

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[1]

[2] Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind (New York: Basic Books 1986) 221.

Would such relationship be possible in an environment where face-to-face encounters were non-existent? My immersion in this culture offered an opportunity for this investigation.

Following Gilligan, psychologists Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule speak of the importance of care and connection for women's learning--traits that contribute to a connected knowing. These authors describe the experiences of a student in two writing groups. The student's college group, devoted primarily to technique, was not working. The criticism was "`hurtful but not helpful.'" The highschool group, on the other hand, had been "`terrific.'" As the student explained, "`We all knew each other inside out, so you knew what each person was trying to do in her writing....You can't really help if you don't know people."[1] Like the student cited by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, I, too, had seen college writing groups collapse--occasionally because of the personalities within the group but usually because of insufficient time for building community. I was curious whether the culture of computer conferencing would enable relationships to develop to provide the nurturing and caring that would build a community for effective collaboration in composition.

Since students knew one another only through computer space, I encouraged the naming of self and the developing of relationship. I did not assign pseudonyms as practiced in

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[1] Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 222.

some computer conferences.[12] Experiencing growth under one's own name seemed important. I wanted students to claim their own subjectivity through relationships developed with their classmates.

Committed to feminist collaboration, I prepared a composition curriculum, Writing for the 21st Century, grounded on collaborative composition theory and also reflecting principles of Schuster and Van Dyne's "woman-focused" classroom. Students were encouraged to uncover gender biases relating to authority roles masked in social institutions; to assume authority by giving approval and validation to their peers; to value experience by understanding its sources; and to work together in a caring community.[3] I extended these basic principles to include Schuster and Van Dyne's sixth stage of curriculum change, namely, a "transformed, balanced curriculum" that raises questions about gender issues of women and men, reflecting how these issues intersect with class and race.[4] Designed

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[1] Jerome Bump, "Radical Changes in Class Discussion in Using Networked Computers," Computers and the Humanities 24 (1990): 56.

[5] Marilyn M. Cooper and Cynthia L. Selfe, "Computer Conferences and Learning: Authority, Resistance, and Internally Persuasive Discourse," College English 52:8 (1990): 852-53.

[6] Marilyn R. Schuster and Susan R. Van Dyne, Women's Place in the Academy: Transforming the Liberal Arts Curriculum (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld) 168-169.

for men and women, the curriculum attempted to offer an "inclusive vision of human experience based on difference and diversity."[1] Having seen students compose essays perfunctorily, I was ready for a curriculum change that would make writing more vital.

The curriculum for Writing for the 21st Century linked a critique of cultural institutions to personal experience, as students read and wrote about the institutions of family, education, and workplace. Topical items in the conference offered locations for large-group discussions about class readings and for small-group discussions relating to each student's response to the reading. Other locations gave space for "chit-chat," computer questions, class procedures, and writing tips.

Early connections occurred in introductions in which students turned to the benign subject of pets. They soon pursued more important discussion, but these conversations reflected that even in asynchronous computer networking, personal connection was possible. We were entertained when Kathryn informed us, later in the course, that her cats now competed for computer time, racing to the computer whenever she mentioned "the C-word" (4:52, 15-JAN-91, 15:08).[2] Not to

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[4] Schuster and Van Dyne 16.

[1] Schuster and Van Dyne 16.

[2] Notation refers to item and response numbers of the computer transcript. Spelling and punctuation occur as in original transcript.

be outdone, Kathleen added that Thumper liked to walk on her keyboard and that he had finally keyed in a message she could read: C:\>"A Bvg" (4:53, 15-JAN-91, 20:21).

Conquering computer functions, as well as chats about favorite pets, brought students together. The following conversation illustrates such interaction:

> 1:44) Mary 04-FEB-91 13:15
> Hi all. I've been avoiding the upload/ download part so far. So this is my maiden voyage. I hope it works.
>
> 1:45) Mary 04-FEB-91 13:26
> YES!!!!! She shoots, she scores (finally)!
>
> 1:46) Marilyn 04-FEB-91 20:39
> Alright! Way to go, Mary.

Support with computer mechanics continued to bring students together, as evidenced by the exchange below:

> 4:3) Gary 28-JAN-91 19:39
> Don't worry about pushing the wrong button, you will get plenty of chances to do it over. I've been playing with the system for several days and am finally getting the hang of it. Jump in feet first, the scribing is fine.
>
> 4:4) Marilyn 28-JAN-91 20:20
> Gary, that's a pretty brave statement about pushing buttons, but it's true. So far, I've managed to lose a file, get locked into Kermit and had to hang up and try again, but it worked. This really is pretty neat talking back and forth this way.

When a minority student finally logged on after several delays, Hank welcomed her:

> 10:2) Hank 20-FEB-91 22:46
> Hello, Maggie, glad to see you on board and in our small group. If there is any way I can help, please send me a message or mail note.

Early connections become more meaningful as participants responded to assigned readings and received feedback on their

writings. Students discovered shared experiences when they wrote about problems of being teachers' pets in early grades, feeling guilt toward parents and care providers, and the trials of being children of alcoholics. This latter common bond led to Kathleen's response:

> 8:4) Kathleen 30-OCT-90 0:58
> Kathryn, I also grew up in an alcoholic household, and I now believe that in an adverse way, that provided the training to be strong. You mention in your essay that your parents were unable to stand up for you when it really counted. Perhaps that made you better able to be so independent. It was another occasion when you had to do without what you thought you should be getting from your parents, and as is characteristic of children of alcoholics, you simply made do with your own resources. Kudos to you and your successes.

Relationships continued to grow as students learned of classmates with similar points of view. Lori wrote to Patti,

> 57:2) Lori 01-APR-91 19:17
> Patty, I was also amazed at how similar our thoughts were about the writing. I don't know if you've read my response writing yet or not, but I think that when you do, you'll see a lot of similarity in how we reacted to Rodriguez's writing.

The relationship developed even more between Lori and Patti when they discovered similar past experience with writing. Both students' writing interests had been cut off as adolescents because of interactions with the rigidity and insensitivity of masculine authority (68:1, 16-APR-1991, 18:48; 71:1, 02-APR-91, 20:19). Similar bonding from shared opinions occurred between male students.

> 83:3) Ray 14-APR-91 11:15
> Hank, although I am not in your group, I wanted to let you know that I agreed with you that

> "Automation Madness" was a one sided account that didn't show any of the good points of automation. I also think that automation can free up workers from some of the more monotonous tasks.
>
> 93:3) Ray 13-APR-91 16:04
> Gary, I know exactly what you mean when you talk about how difficult it is to work on your own car now. I used to do all of my own maintenance, back when all you needed to do a tune up was a tach-dwell meter and a timing light, now I don't even do my own oil changes, it's just too much of a hassle. My 87 truck has 8 spark plugs on a four cylinder engine (half of which you can't find without a diagram).

Students followed my invitation to describe their computing environments. A member of this growing community, I, too, joined in. From my quiet computer space, I could see a wall of my college son's highschool triathlon ribbons (14:29, 15-FEB-91, 11:50), while Michele worked in a "war zone" created by active young children in her midst (4:30, 15-FEB-91, 10:29). Gary had only a niche in the bedroom, having given over his office to step-children (4:32, 15-FEB-91, 20:47). Mary did her scribing at work where her "secret joy in the menial job of a secretary...[was] sneaking in as much writing as possible" (4:39, 18-FEB-91, 11:46). Seeing students in the private world of their daily environments--rarely alluded to in the walled classroom--added a personal dimension to the electronic classroom.

The small groups offered the most opportunity for developing relationship. For the final project, students received a "double perspective" to their work. First, they wrote to a group member to share their reflections on that student's collaboration and, then, with insights from these

views and from their own investigations, constructed a final paper to interpret their own collaboration.[1] The following excerpts from Sue's response to Michele depict the sensitivity and the value of the relationships that developed particularly through small groups in the free space of computer conferencing:

> 115:1) Sue 3-MAY-91 19:54
> Response to Michele's Collaboration Michele
>
> ...You've let us know quite a bit about yourself through your writings. They have involved a lot about your family and personal experiences. There is strong emotion in your essays.
>
> I think we have a common bond in the way we look at some of the issues that we've dealt with in this course. We seem to have the same feelings about men and women's roles in society, and what we think is both good and bad about those roles. I think we could have some interesting discussions on these topics, particularly if we included some participants who obviously don't share our views!
>
> Your style of critiquing has been beneficial to me (as has the style of everyone in the group). I began the course by being much too analytical and stiff. Your style helped me loosen up and focus on the important aspects of everyone's essays....
>
> The only negative comment I would make, and it's not really all that negative, is that I wish you could have kept up with the group a little better. I love reading your contributions, and would have liked to see more of them. But you explained in one of your writings what a hectic life you lead, so it's quite understandable.
>
> I hope you have enjoyed the course and can come away with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, because I think you earned it.

Gary, a member of another group, added, "Collaboration was great....Working in small groups was wonderful. We formed

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[10] I am indebted to David Bleich for the design of this assignment.

very definite relationships with each other" (124:9). For Mary, interaction was more available in this electronic classroom than in the traditional rooms she remembered (124:11).

Such connections revealed the empathy that Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule had identified as important to women's learning. Connecting through empathy also signaled the involvement described by Tannen--the "emotional connection individuals feel which binds them to other people as well as to places, things, activities, ideas, memories, and word." For Tannen, such involvement in conversation--and in literary discourse--is "not a given but an achievement," an achievement based on an active listener as well as speaker and on perception of coherence that "creates an emotional experience of insight...and connectedness."[1] Despite face-to-face presence, electronic relationships seemed to contain this involvement and empathy.

Early in the course, students spoke about such interactions:

> 52:1) Marilyn 08-MAR-91 19:35
> It seems that you get to know the people you're writing to and who are writing back.
>
> 98:1) Charlotte 03-FEB-91 15:58
> You get a sense of anticipating how the others are going to respond, because after awhile you start to get a good sense of where your classmates are coming from, of how they feel about certain issues.

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[1] Deborah Tannen, Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989) 12, 13.

The relationships developed through the computer conferences affected students' work. Sue explained this connection in her final investigation of learning through collaboration:

> From: SUE 16-MAY-1991 21:29
> To: MARION
> Subject: Final Project
>
> I think for me the primary focus of this course was that I learned to hear the various writer's thoughts rather than merely reading their words. More than simply reading between the lines, I developed a sense of the story behind the story--the reason why the writer created the piece in the first place. I felt, by the end of the collaboration, that I could understand the mindset of the author and thereby comprehend his point of view, rather than simply agreeing or disagreeing with them....
>
> When I received my group's first responses to my own essays, I was a little taken back by some of their interpretations....My comment "...men would exhibit more `feminine' characteristics if it were more socially acceptable" was completely misinterpreted by one member of my group. I felt genuine anger in this person's response when he wrote back saying that he didn't understand why I felt it was necessary for him to `act like a woman.' But as time went on, and I read more from this person, I began to see what they were really thinking, and how they really felt about the subjects we were dealing with, and felt that the previous comment was just a knee jerk response coming from a place of insecurity, not hostility. And as this person opened up and began to reveal his innermost thoughts, it was easy to see the motivation behind the defense. <u>It became impossible NOT to see each person's point of view</u> [emphasis added]. Although I often disagreed, I began to understand. Their writings were an extension of themselves, as were the stories of the established authors....

Sue took from the study a method for understanding both professional and student authors. The relationships in the electronic community facilitated this process so important to

her own literacy in a multicultural world, a process that encourages the reader and the writer, through involvement, to seek out the other person's point of view, not always to agree with that view but to acknowledge it.

Many of the relationships developed through computer conferencing reflect the intimacy that feminists had named as important to a caring environment. Renee summed up her feelings toward classmates this way:

> I have their addresses and I have relationships with those people [emphasis added]....That is significant to me because I think that we are isolated in a lot of ways in our culture....We've said really important things to each other and if we choose to we can continue with that or if something were to come up for me around some kind of an issue, I'd have an ally....God, I even know Bob's family (Interview, 3/2/91).

In a focus group interview at the end of Writing for the 21st Century, I asked students to respond to the following question:

> Item 127) Marion 18-MAY-91 21:28
> When I write our "story" of electronic collaboration and composition, is there a statement that you want me to be certain to include?

Hank was the first to reply:

> 127:1) Hank 22-MAY-91 7:01
> Marion, the story of electronic collaboration and composition should include a statement of freedom [emphasis added] for the writer. This method of writing has reduced or maybe limited the normal restrictions of a writing environment and provided open, flexible and free platform to develop the theme of any composition. --Hank

I, too, had felt the freedom that Hank had alluded to, a freedom that resembled the atmosphere of the women's

liberation groups depicted in Pamela Allen's Free Space: a Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation. That group worked toward "freeing women to affirm their view of reality and to learn to think independently...."[1] But the freedom went farther. The computer not only sustained such a free space but also it extended the space to new dimensions. Kathleen linked these new dimensions to the building of relationships:

> This free space allowed exchange with unknown people, yet at the same time it encouraged an openness that led to important growth for the individual, a growth that enabled the person to relate to others more closely and to know herself more fully (Interview, 6/19/91).

Compositions reflected similar sharing. Even Marilyn, who was reluctant to name her family experience in Response Writing 1, showed more openness in Composition 1. She explained that initially she wrote the paper in third person "as if I was someone else," but rewrote it in first person to be more truthful. Writing about the importance of choice in one's life, Marilyn named her own experience in one of the paragraphs:

> 47:1) Marilyn 03-MAR-91 16:21
> Composition 1
> ...I was a dysfunctional person for as long as I can remember. I no longer consider myself one, because I am lucky and smart enough to realize what had been happening and I made the choice to get

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[12] Pamela Allen, Free Space: A Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation (New York: Times Change P, 1970) 8.

> myself out of the situations and away from the people who were enabling my dysfunction....

The community built through computer conferencing and feminist collaboration helped students overcome fears. Sue found that she could "disagree in a nice way" without being afraid of hurting someone's feelings. David noted that in the classroom he would have been the one "listening but not contributing"(124:2, 20-MAY-91, 20:21). Mike acknowledged, "Had we all been together it is certain that at the end of each session someone would have not had the chance to be heard." (124:3, 21-MAY-91, 21:35).

As students and I reflected on the messages sent through the free space of computer conferencing, we were opening ourselves to know more fully the authors of those messages. Though the environment invited controversy, students were willing to listen and to learn from dissenting voices. For men as well as women, this environment of care and connection offered validation. The environment in this computer culture had gone far beyond my expectations in establishing a community of trusting, diverse individuals--a community required both in the composition room and in the larger society.

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